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## MUSSOLINI'S IDEOLOGICAL DIPLOMACY: AN UNPUBLISHED DOCUMENT

ROBERT H. WHEALEY

**D**IPLOMATICALLY, Italy was one of the victorious powers at the conclusion of World War I. At the Paris peace conferences of 1919 she joined France, Britain, and the United States as one of the "Big Four" which dismembered Austria-Hungary, imposed harsh conditions on Germany, and outlined the organization of the League of Nations. True great power status, however, eluded Italy, though Italian dreams of national aggrandizement helped the Fascist party duce, Benito Mussolini, come to power in 1922. Ideologically, the Nazi party führer, Adolf Hitler, who took over Germany in 1933, had much in common with Mussolini. But since both were rampant nationalists, with imperial ambitions, diplomatic realities at first kept the two men apart.

Germany had long desired union with Austria, while it was to the interest of Italy to preserve Austrian independence as a buffer state. Mussolini made a bid to be the major protector of Austria when in March 1934 he signed, with representatives from Vienna and Budapest, the Rome Protocols. The three states undertook to consult one another on matters of foreign policy. Due to differences over Austria, Mussolini's first meeting with Hitler at Venice in June 1934 was a failure. The murder of Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss of Austria by Austrian Nazis the next month further strained Italian-German relations; Mussolini sent troops to the Brenner Pass in a threatening anti-German gesture.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Two standard works dealing with Austro-German-Italian relations in the mid-1930's are:

However, from the end of 1934 to May 1936, the long-drawn-out Italo-Ethiopian conflict brought a gradual change in Italy's relationships with the great powers of Europe. Mussolini was struggling to build an African empire, and to conquer Abyssinia he needed diplomatic support. This was not forthcoming from Britain which had an interest in preserving the status quo throughout the world and at the League of Nations, where it exerted much influence.

At least as early as May 1935, and perhaps as early as March, Mussolini made an overture to the German foreign ministry, seeking better relations.<sup>2</sup> The Germans avoided any concrete agreement,<sup>3</sup> although benevolent neutrality was offered to Italy in her escalating conflict with Ethiopia. Hitler had withdrawn Germany from the League and felt no obligation to defend Ethiopians, who were, in his mind, racial inferiors.

Later that year, Hitler sent his chief of military intelligence, Vice Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, to discuss outstanding German-Italian problems with his Italian counterpart, Colonnello Mario Roatta.<sup>4</sup> The two met at Gardone near

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Elizabeth Wiskemann, *The Rome-Berlin Axis* (New York, 1949); and Jürgen Gehl, *Austria, Germany, and the Anschluss, 1931-1938* (London, 1963).

<sup>2</sup>Germany, Auswärtiges Amt, *Documents on German foreign policy*, Ser. C and D, (Washington, 1949—) (hereafter cited as *DGFP*) Ser. C, Vol. IV, Documents 63, 87, 109, 164.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, Document 166.

<sup>4</sup>As the years went by, both Canaris and Roatta became critical of the Führer and the Duce, but there is no contemporary evidence that this was the case in 1935. Helmut Kraus-

Verona, on September 16–17, 1935.<sup>5</sup> The status of Italy's relations with France, Britain, and Germany was the topic of discussion. Roatta pointed to improving Italian-German press relations. He assured Canaris that the Italians had no military alliance with the French directed against the Germans, although an Italian-French agreement existed which permitted the Italians to send troops to Africa. Relations with France at the League were bad, and with the British things were even worse. War in Egypt was a possibility. However, Roatta also complained of the existence of a Nazi-Austrian legion on German soil, of pro-German agitation in Italy's South Tirol (Alto Adige), and of the activities of German military intelligence in Italy. Canaris admitted nothing and promised to investigate the charges.

The two intelligence chiefs concluded

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nick, "Canaris," *Neue deutsche Biographie* (Berlin, 1957), III, 116–18, has a good summary of the controversial literature about Canaris.

Roatta, avoiding any mention of Canaris, testified at his own trial in 1945 that he did not go to Germany until early 1936 (Italy, *II processo Roatta* [2d ed.; Rome, 1945], p. 31). This was misleading in light of the Canaris document of September 19, 1935 (n. 5 below), mentioning at least one prior meeting of the two men. In any case, Roatta and Admiral Canaris' predecessors had been trying to maintain good relations between their respective armed forces when tension between the Fascist party and the Nazi party still existed (Report of discussion with Roatta in Rome Dec. 3–8, 1934 by General Karl Heinrich von Stülpnagel, for chief of intelligence, Berlin, to foreign ministry, Dec. 10, 1934, Germany, *Auswärtiges Amt*, "World War II collection of seized enemy records," Microcopy T-120 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.), serial 5573, frames E399905–10. The results of the postwar Roatta trial showed that the Italian was not particularly pro-German or pro-Fascist. He was sentenced to one year for being an accessory to the crimes of more culpable individuals.

<sup>5</sup> Canaris to foreign ministry, *Abw. Abt. Chef* 22/35 Kdos., Sept. 19, 1935 (5573/E399912–17).

with a promise to work out the details of a naval intelligence exchange concerning shipping to the Far East and agreed that they would meet again in November.<sup>6</sup> Most significantly, Roatta suggested that an agreement be concluded with the Gestapo "for the common struggle against the communist danger."<sup>7</sup> This ideological plank could bridge the chasm of Austria and be the highway to a Hitler-Mussolini understanding.

Mussolini's relations with Britain and France worsened as the fighting in Africa sharpened. Sanctions against Italy were voted at the League of Nations in October, and on December 22 the pro-League Anthony Eden replaced the pro-Italian British foreign minister, Sir Samuel Hoare. Pro-League sentiment in Britain had forced the resignation of Hoare because of his proposed pact with the foreign minister of France, Pierre Laval, to by-pass the League of Nations and partition Ethiopia at the expense of Emperor Haile Selassie.<sup>8</sup> In Paris, pro-British and pro-League opinion was focused in a great debate in the French chamber of deputies which began in December and eventually forced Pierre Laval to resign by January 22, 1936. The replacement of Hoare and Laval with men less sympathetic to Fascist Italy deepened the cleavage between Mussolini, Britain, and France. These events further smoothed the path between Rome and Berlin.<sup>9</sup>

On January 7, Mussolini had a conversation with Ulrich von Hassell, the German ambassador in Rome. Hassell

<sup>6</sup> No evidence that they met then has been found.

<sup>7</sup> Canaris to foreign ministry, Sept. 19, 1935 (see n. 5 above).

<sup>8</sup> Gaetano Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II* (New York, 1954), pp. 395–96.

<sup>9</sup> Wiskemann, pp. 51–52.

was to go to Berlin to deliver personally Mussolini's suggestion to the Führer that a non-aggression pact be concluded between Berlin and Vienna. This, according to Hassell, would normalize tense Austrian-German relations, the attempted Nazi Vienna *putsch* of July 1934 would be forgotten, and a non-aggression pact could clear the way for Hitler to move toward a future Berlin-Vienna union. The Duce could not go that far, but he told Hassell that he did not care if Austria eventually became a German satellite as long as her independence was maintained. In this way the Austrian problem, the major issue between the two dictators, could be solved. In a second bid for ideological solidarity, Mussolini also charged that Russian bolshevism was behind the anti-Italian feeling at the League.<sup>10</sup>

The Duce's proposal was avoided by the Führer. Instead he instructed Hassell on January 17 to convey to Mussolini Nazi support of the Fascist government in Italy and Hitler's assurance that he was continuing his policy of benevolent neutrality toward Rome in the Ethiopian war.<sup>11</sup> Why did he postpone, for the time being, any action on Mussolini's suggestion of a non-aggression pact between Berlin and Vienna? Hitler wanted to wait to see if the Duce's new policy toward Austria was, in fact, followed by deeds. He suspected that Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg's visit to Prague on January 16-17 and Italy's prior ties to France could yet backfire against Germany.<sup>12</sup> Hitler still had in mind the Dollfuss murder of 1934 which had led to increased German isolation. Specifically, he wanted Mussolini to exert influence on Vienna to move toward Berlin and away from Prague and Paris.

<sup>10</sup> *DGFP*, Ser. C, Vol. IV, Document 485.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Document 506.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Document 515.

Also, Hitler's general policy was to avoid multilateral pacts. He wanted to make sure that any pact he drew up with Austria did not include Italy as a guarantor. This was what, in fact, was to occur on July 11, 1936 with the signing of the bilateral German-Austrian "Gentlemen's Agreement."<sup>13</sup>

On January 28 Hassell described the results of his Berlin trip to Mussolini. The Duce then promised the ambassador that he would now inform Vienna of his desire that Austria conclude a non-aggression pact with the Germans.<sup>14</sup>

The following document,<sup>15</sup> an interview with Mussolini, covers the same general ground as Hassell's record of the dictator's ideas. On January 31, 1936 the interview took place between the Duce and S.S. Hauptsturmführer Roland E. Strunk<sup>16</sup> (retired captain), correspondent for the Nazi party organ *Völkischer Beobachter*. Through Alfred Rosenberg, party ideologist, Strunk had direct access to Hitler. In 1935 he translated from the Italian and published in Leipzig the major work of Giulio Douhet,

<sup>13</sup> Gehl, chap. v.

<sup>14</sup> *DGFP*, Ser. C, Vol. IV, Document 525.

<sup>15</sup> Germany, Records of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territory, 1941-45, "World War II collection of seized enemy records," Microcopy T-454 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.), serial 56, frames 225-33. This was discovered in an obscure section of the files of Alfred Rosenberg, editor of the *Völkischer Beobachter* and chief of the ideological section of the Nazi party, the Foreign Policy Association; basic translation by the author with assistance from Edward R. Reid, associate professor of German, and associate dean at the University of Maine.

<sup>16</sup> Gerd Rühle, *Das Dritte Reich: dokumentarische Darstellung des Aufbaus der Nation mit Unterstützung des deutschen Reichsarchiven* (Berlin, 1937), V, 435. There is also some material on Strunk at the Hoover Library (see Gerhard L. Weinberg *et al.* (ed.), "Guide to captured German documents [War Documentation Project Study No. 1]" [Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., Air University Human Resources Research Institute, Dec. 1952], pp. 27-28).

the chief advocate of mass bombing of civilian populations. In this meeting we see Hitler's and Mussolini's use of an unorthodox agent to cultivate their budding friendship. This encounter through party auspices contains more ideology than Hassell's diplomatic minutes of January 7 and January 28 with the Italian dictator. Hitherto the historian has had little from the Italian side for this period. Here we see in Mussolini's own words the reasons for his changing relationship with the great powers. Here also we see his sweeping ideological bluff in the face of diplomatic insecurity. The Duce carefully skirts the subject of Austria, the main issue causing differences between the two dictators. Hitler had indicated on January 17, through Hassell, that he regarded ideology as the basis for an agreement with Italy. Mussolini, in talking to Strunk, now reveals his great hope in creating a common front with Hitler against the democracy of England and France and against the communism of the Soviet Union.

DOCUMENT (excerpts)<sup>17</sup>

[Copy]

MUSSOLINI: Have you just come from Berlin?

I (Captain Roland Strunk): Yes, indeed.

MUSSOLINI: You reported to the Führer. What did the Führer say?

I: Your Excellency, the Führer and Reichschancellor listened to my report with warm, human interest, he—

MUSSOLINI: So, with warmth. I am a friend of your Führer. I have always been his friend, even before he triumphed. I often defended him even then, in my conversations, against his enemies. He is a great man, a genius and genuine leader. What did you tell him?

I: I told the Führer frankly what I saw.

<sup>17</sup> Material omitted deals mainly with the military aspects of the Ethiopian campaign. A series of six dots (. . . . .) indicates omission of a comment or comments by one or both parties in the interview.

When he learned that I would probably see your Excellency, he desired that I treat your Excellency with the same frankness.

MUSSOLINI: Naturally.

I: Your Excellency, I hope that you might answer my questions just as frankly as I shall answer yours. The German people have been taking a keen interest in the political questions of the Mediterranean conflict. They do not quite understand the divided nature of the Italian press policy. In one part of the current press one finds an emphatic friendly gesture toward Germany, while at the same time another part of the press seeks a sympathetic echo in London and Paris. In Germany people cannot imagine how in the authoritarian state of your Excellency diametrically opposed public viewpoints can represent an independent action.

MUSSOLINI (*He stopped me with a wave of the hand, and at first he looked like Caesar and then laughed*): Politics! Don't you understand? Your Führer will understand it. Italy at this moment can not lay her cards on the table. We cannot openly show France and England our position toward Germany. Not yet! One must move slowly and cautiously. But between Germany and Italy there is a common fate. That is becoming stronger and stronger. That cannot be denied. Germany and Italy are congruent cases. One day we shall meet whether we want to or not. But we want to! Because we must! (*Mussolini pounded his fist on the table.*) I am still very strong. Italy is very strong. Stronger than people think! They assume a lot in the foreign press. You certainly know Italy's strength from the World War. England understands this very well. The (present) situation is complete nonsense! There are peoples who have nothing and other peoples who have everything. France and England have everything and they want to maintain the status quo. Whoever attacks this status quo must be destroyed. That is why they once encircled Germany; today they want to encircle me. That is not so easy!

Indeed, what are the sanctions? Naturally they aggravate the situation very much. I must save, think hard, and be inventive, in order to make ends meet financially. But in the World War Germany totally isolated also held out against all expectations; one

can always find a way. Even those states adhering to sanctions are doing business with me. I just have to pay double for everything that they deliver to me. Oil sanctions? I can still make war one year with my oil! And the rain is nonsense! We were bogged down in the rain last year and we worked and we didn't die. . . . Today the Italian people are embittered and realize the necessity of conflict. Whoever knows Italy and Italy's needs is decisively on our side and does not subscribe to sanctions.

I: Yes, indeed, your Excellency, but also there are some small modifications to note, which interest public opinion in Germany very much.

MUSSOLINI: What, for example?

I: Austria! What is one to think about the trip of Schuschnigg to Prague?

MUSSOLINI: Well, that is probably due to the nervousness of the Austrian Chancellor based on economic considerations. I told Schuschnigg that I thought this trip a mistake. However, he still went to Prague, which was a mistake for him and he has had no success. If he followed my advice, he could have avoided that error. Naturally I can not do everything at once, and listen to Austria's cares when I need all my strength at home.

I: I myself thought, when your Excellency took up the matter, that it would have been better if the Austrian Chancellor had gone to Berlin instead of to Prague—naturally without our endorsement.

MUSSOLINI: Why? The gentlemen in Vienna can still travel wherever they please. I am not the Austrian Chancellor. After all. (*Pause*). . . . Now what else do you want to know?

I: How does your Excellency explain the behavior of France toward Italy in the question of the Abyssinian and Mediterranean conflict?

MUSSOLINI: France has acted quite badly. People in Italy are no longer friends of the French. We deceived ourselves. The French are egotists and chauvinists. Not the people—but the Government! People in Paris need every moment to rearm against Germany in order to encircle Germany once again. That's why! Do you understand? They will also try to draw us in against Germany. But we will never again be able to resume the old relationship with London or France.

The Italian people are too aroused over what they have done, and are still doing to us.

I: What about the Stresa Front, your Excellency?

MUSSOLINI: We have the same enemies, don't we? And Russia! This Russian Army—Bolshevism. Only we two know about it. I and Herr Hitler. Their army is very strong.

I: I know the Red Army, your Excellency.

MUSSOLINI (very interested): How? What do you think of this Army? Is it good?

I (*I described to Mussolini my detailed impressions of Soviet Russia*): They naturally have their weak moments too. The more the mechanization and also the militarization of industry goes forward, the more the shortage in organizational talent becomes noticeable, a weakness from which Russia has always suffered. They have not carried out their plans to build and maintain a railroad network between industrial and agricultural centers to the degree to which the army has been built up.

MUSSOLINI: How is the morale in the Red Army?

I: Good, although today it is only partly the Red Army in Lenin's sense. In the People's Army there is an overwhelming majority of peasant boys. Nowhere in the world is a peasant a communist. . . .

MUSSOLINI: That is very interesting! Have you told this to your Führer?

I: Yes, indeed! . . . Is your Excellency willing to end the conflict in Ethiopia with a compromise in case it is necessary?

MUSSOLINI (*Mussolini stood up and paced up and down behind his desk*): Cessation of hostilities and treaties between great powers are always compromises.

I: Versailles was no compromise, your Excellency.

MUSSOLINI: No, but if you want to be pedantic it was an ultimate victory for Germany, because in this treaty there were already all the requirements for an awakening of the German people. What is it like now in Germany?

I: Your Excellency, we must work hard. We have our worries, and we have to make our sacrifices. But we know now that this has a purpose (*Then Mussolini came around the table, and seeing that the conversation was about to end, I stood up*).

MUSSOLINI: You have many enemies! Also

German ones—but that is always the same. You and we in Italy have been built up upon the proletariat. But there are still the intellectuals who are infected with liberalism and from these convictions stand against us. How is the Führer getting on?

I: Very well, Excellency. The rumors of his sickness are, as always, completely baseless disseminations of certain circles.

MUSSOLINI (*Mussolini led me through the hall to the door*): Those things are trifles. They cannot stop the course of necessity. There are only trifles which stand between us and Germany. The major necessities will dictate our actions.

I: Certainly, your Excellency! Perhaps someday the Austrian question can also be included with those matters that have been arranged (*between us*)—

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MUSSOLINI: I am quite pleased with this conversation. (*As I was going through the wide ante-room, Mussolini opened the door and said*): This audience was naturally only a private talk.

I: Certainly, your Excellency!

[End of Document]

The Nazi-Fascist ideological front against "Democracy tainted by Bolshevism" was later used as a pretext by Hitler when he decided in February 1936 to march into the Rhineland.<sup>18</sup> While Hitler marched west, he spoke of the communist danger from Soviet Russia. The joint Italian-German intervention in late July 1936 in the Spanish Civil War was publicly justified as necessary to stem the tide of communism.<sup>19</sup> Captain Strunk, who had interviewed Mussolini in January, became a "chief German agent" to General Franco during the early months of the Spanish war,<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *DGFP*, Ser. C, Vol. IV, Document 575; Editor's note, pp. 1170-71, Document 579.

<sup>19</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge (ed.), *Ciano's diplomatic papers*, trans. Stuart Hood (London, 1948), pp. 20-21, 43-48; *DGFP*, Ser. D, Vol. III, Editor's note, pp. 1-2; Norman H. Baynes (ed.), *The speeches of Adolf Hitler* (2 vols.; London, 1942), II, 1674.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Consul Charles Bay, Seville, to Cordell

which was Hitler's and Mussolini's first joint military venture. Much more important than Strunk to Hitler as advisor to Spain was Admiral Canaris.<sup>21</sup> General Roatta became the first military commander of Mussolini's expeditionary corps in that war.<sup>22</sup>

Hitler's and Mussolini's parallel policies had become a common working policy months before the formal proclamation of the flexible understanding known as the Axis during Foreign Minister Ciano's visit to Berlin in October 1936. Writing in December 1936, Ambassador von Hassell summarized the long-term development of Axis relations.<sup>23</sup> He pointed out the similarity between the Ethiopian war and the Spanish Civil War in forcing Italy to look toward Germany rather than to Britain and France, and Hassell recalled that Mussolini had first warmed up to Germany in January 1936—the time of the ideological *rapprochement* between Hitler and Mussolini described above.

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Hull, Nov. 29, 1936, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1936*, (Washington, 1953), II, 582-83. See also another Strunk interview of Mussolini reported by Ambassador William Dodd, Berlin, to Hull, Jan. 23, 1937, Department of State, Diplomatic Papers, Document 762.65/284 (National Archives, Washington).

<sup>21</sup> Interrogations of German military intelligence officers by Russians, in Special Supplement of *Neue Zeit*, No. 13 (July 1, 1946), pp. 3-18; Frank Jellinek, *The civil war in Spain* (London, 1938), pp. 280-82; Karl Abshagen, *Canaris* (London, 1956), pp. 107-14; Ian Colvin, *Master spy* (New York, 1951), pp. 30-35; Manfred Merkes, *Die deutsche Politik gegenüber dem spanischen Bürgerkrieg, 1936-1939* (Bonn, 1961), p. 20; Gert Buchheit, *Der deutsche Geheimdienst* (Munich, 1966), pp. 135-37.

<sup>22</sup> *DGFP*, Ser. D, Vol. III, Document 220; *Il processo Roatta*, pp. 32-33; Enno von Rintelen, *Mussolini als Bundesgenosse* (Tübingen, 1951), p. 17; Abshagen, pp. 112-13.

<sup>23</sup> *DGFP*, Ser. D, Vol. III, Document 157.